

# RECORDS OF SKUAS AND SABINE'S GULLS ASHORE IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

P . G . RYAN

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## INTRODUCTION

Five species of skuas, Subantarctic *Catharacta antarctica*, South Polar *C. maccormicki*, Arctic *Stercorarius parasiticus*, Longtailed *S. longicaudus* and Pomarine *S. pomarinus*, and Sabine's Gull *Larus sabini*, are common to rare nonbreeding visitors to southern African coastal waters (Lambert 1971, Summerhayes *et al.* 1974, Brooke & Sinclair 1978, Lambert 1980). They are seldom recorded ashore, although vagrant *Stercorarius* skuas of all three species have been recorded well inland in Africa during passage (Furness in press). This paper attempts to summarize the occurrence of skuas and Sabine's Gulls ashore in southern Africa.

## SPECIES ACCOUNTS

### Subantarctic Skua

This common non-breeding visitor from farther south is more abundant in winter, but occurs throughout the year along the entire coast. Most records of birds ashore are in winter, and none is more than 5 km from the sea (Table 1).

### South Polar Skua

This scarce visitor to southern African waters is hard to distinguish from the Subantarctic Skua and may be overlooked. There are no records of it ashore in southern Africa.

### Arctic Skua

A common summer visitor to coastal waters, some Arctic Skuas overwinter, particularly off South West Africa/Namibia (Ryan *et al.* 1984). They feed chiefly by kleptoparasitizing gulls and terns (Furness 1983), often chasing them over the surf zone and shoreline. Arctic Skuas are also frequently seen flying over or resting on land during periods of strong onshore wind (Table 1). The only area where there are sizeable roosts on land is along the desert coast of northern South West Africa/Namibia (Ryan *et al.* 1984).

TABLE 1  
RECORDS OF SKUAS STERCORARIIDAE AND SABINE'S GULLS *LARUS SABINI* ASHORE IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

Locality	Date	Nature & source of record
Subantarctic Skua <i>Catharacta antarctica</i>		
Bird Island, Lambert's Bay, SW Cape, 32 05S, 18 18E	12 Aug 1983	1 roosting, P.G.R.
Cape Town harbour breakwater, SW Cape, 33 54S, 18 26E	15-22 Sep 1984	1 roosting, Cope 1984
Olifantsbos, SW Cape, 34 16S, 18 23E	17 Aug 1985	1 flying over fynbos, Fraser & McMahon 1985
Cape of Good Hope Nature Reserve, SW Cape, 34 18S, 18 26E	Nov 1973	1 in a firebreak for a week, Middlemiss & Langley 1975
Kabeljous River, E Cape, 34 00S, 24 56E	13 Sep 1980	1 flying over, P.A.R. Hockey pers. comm.
Richard's Bay south pier, Natal, 28 49S, 32 06E	7 Dec 1980	1 roosting, P.G.R.
Arctic Skua <i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>		
near Ugab River, SWA/Namibia, 21 09S, 13 35E	25 Nov 1981	c. 10 roosting, Ryan <i>et al.</i> 1984
Berg River lagoon, SW Cape, 32 47S, 18 08E	26 Jan 1985	1 roosting, P.A.R. Hockey pers. comm.
Noordhoek beach, SW Cape, 34 07S, 18 21E	1 Oct 1984	1 roosting, J.M.D. Graham pers. comm.
Sandvlei, SW Cape, 34 05S, 18 28E	19 Feb 1984	1 flying over, Graham 1984
Strandfontein Sewage Works, SW Cape, 34 05S, 18 31E	22 Jan 1984	1 roosting & harrying waders, P.G.R.
	22 Dec 1985	1 flying over, Hofmeyr 1986

Cape Hangklip, SW Cape, 34 23S, 18 51E	11 Dec 1985	1 feeding on <i>Talorchestia</i> on beach, Hofmeyr 1986
Longtailed Skua <i>S. longicaudus</i>		
Kalahari Gemsbok National Park, N Cape, 26 59S, 20 18E	28 May 1980	1 feeding on termite alates, Spearpoint 1981
Pomarine Skua <i>S. pomarinus</i>		
near Ugab River, SWA/Namibia, 21 09S, 13 35E	25 Nov 1981	c. 20 roosting, Ryan <i>et al.</i> 1984
Strandfontein Sewage Works, SW Cape, 34 05S, 18 31E	25 Feb 1979	1 roosting, Ryan & Abernethy 1979
Sabine's Gull <i>Larus sabini</i>		
Durissa Bay, SWA/Namibia, 21 16S, 13 41E	12 Jan 1978	1 ?sickly - flew weakly, J. Cooper pers. comm.
Yzerfontein beach, SW Cape, 33 15S, 18 07E	24 Nov 1979	1 ?sickly - flew weakly, P.G.R. & G. Avery
Strandfontein Sewage Works, SW Cape, 34 05S, 18 31E	Nov 1984	c. 20 flying over ponds, J.C. Sinclair pers. comm.
Durban Bay, Natal, 29 53S, 31 03E	Nov-Dec 1972	2 immatures ?sickly, J.C. Sinclair pers. comm.
Mgeni Estuary, Natal, 29 49S, 31 03E	Feb 1979 May 1979	1 in tern roost, 3 in tern roost, Cyrus & Robson 1980
Mvoti Estuary, Natal, 29 23S, 31 20E	Dec 1974	1 in tern roost, Cyrus & Robson 1980

### Longtailed Skua

This species is a scarce to locally abundant visitor to the waters off the west and south coasts of southern Africa, with a few stragglers reaching the waters of Natal. They are less dependent on kleptoparasitism than are Arctic Skuas and are rarely seen close inshore except off South West Africa/Namibia. The only inland record for southern Africa is that of an adult bird in the central Kalahari (Spearpoint 1981).

### Pomarine Skua

This species is a common summer visitor to the coastal waters of South West Africa/Namibia, but is much scarcer off the rest of southern Africa. It is similar in habits to the Arctic Skua, often persuing terns over the beach and roosting behind the beach along the desert coast of northern South West Africa/Namibia (Ryan *et al.* 1984). There is only one record of a Pomarine Skua ashore for the rest of southern Africa (Table 1).

### Sabine's Gull

This species is a common summer visitor to the Benguela Current region off the west coast of southern Africa, with some birds reaching the south and east coasts as far north as Natal. Over most of its range it very seldom comes ashore, although it occasionally occurs over the surf zone and coastal water bodies during strong onshore winds. Apparently sickly individuals occasionally roost on beaches. However, the few stragglers reaching Natal frequently join large tern roosts at river mouths (Cyrus & Robson 1980).

## DISCUSSION

All five species considered switch from a Primarily terrestrial existence during the breeding season to an almost exclusively marine existence during the non-breeding season. The incidence of birds coming ashore in southern Africa is low in relation to the size of the populations offshore. The scarcity of Sabine's Gulls off Natal may force them to join tern roosts ashore. The presence of roosts of *Stercorarius* skuas on the desert coast of northern South West Africa/Namibia is unusual and is probably a result of a high skua density coupled with the high wave action in the area.

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- P.G. Ryan, FitzPatrick Institute, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch 7700, South Africa.